Let Alexandria burn; symbols are not bodies

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We are taught to mourn Alexandria as a civilizational wound, a moment when something irreplaceable was lost and never quite recovered. The story is familiar enough to feel unquestionable. There was a place where the world's knowledge was gathered and wisdom was accumulated to be safeguarded, and when it burned, humanity itself was diminished. From this image we draw a moral that seems obvious and is, therefore, rarely examined. Knowledge is fragile, preservation is virtuous, forgetting is dangerous, and destruction, even accidental, is akin to barbarism. The lesson settles in early and quietly, until it no longer sounds like an argument at all but a reflex, something that activates whenever loss is mentioned, the past loosens its hold on the present, or memory threatens to slip.

This reflex does more than encourage care; it smuggles in an assumption about what knowledge is and how it persists. We are encouraged to think of knowledge as something that exists independently of action, as if it were something that can be cultivated, gathered, stored, transmitted, and rescued in the same form in which it was first produced. Alexandria becomes tragic not simply because texts were lost, but because we imagine that what those texts represented could exist nowhere else. Our anxiety is not really about paper or ink. It is about continuity. We fear that if what is written disappears, what was known disappears with it.

Our fear would be justified if knowledge were the sort of thing that lived primarily in symbols, but it does not. Knowledge, whatever reverence we attach to it, is not an active force moving through the world. It does not respond to pressure, adjust to circumstance, or suffer consequences when conditions change. It does not decide. It waits. What moves the world are people acting under constraint. Bodies sensing, responding, improvising, failing, adjusting, and trying again. Symbols accompany this process, but they do not substitute for it, and mistaking accompaniment for causation is where our confusion begins.

It helps to be clear at the outset. Knowledge does not act. People act. Tools act in limited ways. Environments act back. Knowledge, by contrast, is inert. It is adjacent to action, derived from it, and dependent on it for meaning. To treat knowledge as though it were itself an agent, something that can be deployed, applied, or enacted, is to assign it a role it cannot play. This is not poetic disagreement but a practical one, and its consequences are everywhere.

Knowledge, stripped of ceremony, is residue. It is what remains after some pattern of action has worked often enough to be named. When a way of doing things allows someone to persist in a particular environment, we notice. We compress the experience, give it form, and tell a story about why it worked. That story becomes knowledge. This process is neither mysterious nor shameful; it is how finite beings manage complexity. However, the story comes after the success, not before it, and this order matters more than we tend to admit.

Because knowledge is residue, it feels solid when it is not under stress. On the page, in the archive, in the syllabus, it appears complete. It has boundaries, can be pointed to, and can be tested for internal consistency. It looks like a thing. But the moment it is called upon to guide action in a living situation, its limitations become apparent. It does not sense what has changed. It does not register urgency. It does not weigh competing pressures. It must be interpreted, and that interpretation happens inside a person who is already acting, committed to the moment, and too late for consultation.

At the moment of action, no one applies knowledge in the way they later claim they did. When we step back from danger, adjust to a shifting conversation, improvise in the face of uncertainty, or navigate a complex situation without clear rules, there is no internal retrieval of propositions labeled “correct response.” Action unfolds in real time, under conditions that do not pause for reflection. What operates in these moments is not stored knowledge but familiarity, attunement, habit, and sensitivity to context; capacities built through prior engagement, not through recall.

Only afterward does knowledge arrive. Once action has occurred, once its consequences are visible, we construct a narrative that makes our movement appear intentional, reasoned, and grounded in prior understanding. We tell ourselves that we acted because we knew. We

invert the sequence. Knowledge becomes the supposed cause rather than our explanation. This inversion is comforting, because it preserves the image of rational control, but it is false. The actual sequence is always the same. Situation, response, adjustment, then story.

This is why knowledge is always late. It cannot be otherwise. Knowledge is abstracted from time and place; action is nothing but time and place. No amount of emphasis or repetition can close that gap, which is why the idea that knowledge can be enacted faithfully, repeatedly, and without distortion is a fiction. What can be repeated are words, procedures, and rituals. What cannot be repeated are the conditions that made them effective in the first place.

Every attempt to "apply" knowledge is an act of translation under loss. The context has shifted, pressures have changed, and our assumptions no longer hold in quite the same way. What remains is an approximation, and approximation that accumulates drift. The first repetition may be close enough to pass unnoticed. The next less so. Over time, what was once guidance hardens into ritual, and ritual demands enforcement precisely because it can no longer rely on responsiveness.

This is not because people are careless or unfaithful to the original insight. It is because reality refuses to stand still long enough for fidelity to be possible. Knowledge promises continuity; action offers only recalibration. When systems insist on repetition instead of adjustment, they do not preserve intelligence; they suppress it.

Symbols follow a predictable trajectory. They emerge when past action is named. They guide briefly, helping attention settle where it might otherwise wander. If they are accurate, behavior changes and stabilizes. At that point, the symbol has done its work. It becomes unnecessary. The danger begins when its initial necessity is mistaken for virtue, and preservation replaces responsiveness. Instead of allowing the symbol to fade, we treat it as indispensable. We repeat it, institutionalize it, and build authority around it. The symbol persists as command long after it has lost contact with the conditions that once gave it meaning.

When this happens, failure is misdiagnosed as forgetfulness. We worry that if the symbol disappears, the capacity it once pointed to will vanish as well, but this worry misunderstands

how persistence actually works. What is essential to survival cannot remain symbolic. It must be embodied, distributed across practices, embedded in tools, environments, and habits. If something truly matters, someone is already doing it, often without being able to explain how or why.

Forgetting is not decay but evidence of integration. When a skill no longer requires recall, it has been absorbed. When a value no longer needs to be stated, it has shaped behavior and environment sufficiently to operate without commentary. We confuse the disappearance of symbols with the disappearance of intelligence because we have been trained to look for intelligence only where symbols remain visible, but competence does not announce itself. It simply persists.

Institutions struggle with this invisibility. They depend on symbols to coordinate action across distance and scale. They must treat abstractions as if they are sufficient, because local responsiveness cannot be centralized or audited. As a result, repetition, compliance, and fidelity become priorities, not out of cruelty but necessity. Drift is labeled error because drift exposes the limits of symbolic control. Judgment is replaced by protocol, perception by category, and adaptation by preservation. The system does not become malicious; it becomes rigid.

This rigidity is what Alexandria ultimately represents. Not a living intelligence extinguished, but an accumulation of residue mistaken for continuity. A library preserves what was said, not what was done. It centralizes memory without any mechanism for renewal. When it burns, nothing alive is destroyed. What is revealed is that whatever intelligence once produced those texts had already moved elsewhere, carried forward in the embodied practices, skills, and ways of living no archive can contain.

To let Alexandria burn is therefore not a celebration of ignorance or loss. It is an insistence on a different relationship to knowledge, one that does not confuse preservation with care. Controlled burning is not vandalism. It is maintenance. It clears space for responsiveness and prevents error from compounding unchecked. It recognizes that symbols are tools, not foundations, and that their value lies in their ability to disappear once their work is done.

What carries the world forward is not what is stored but what is practiced. Not what is remembered but what is enacted without needing to be remembered. Intelligence lives in adjustment, in the capacity to respond to what is actually present rather than what was once described. Knowledge arrives afterward, to tell a story about what has already happened. These stories can be useful, even necessary, but they are stories, nonetheless.

If we must grieve Alexandria, we should grieve it properly. Not as the death of knowledge, but as a reminder of how easily we mistake our symbols for the real itself. If we are willing to learn anything from its burning, it should be that what truly matters does not need to be saved in any symbol. It persists because it is lived.

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